

Record floods pound Beijing

37 killed, 50,000 evacuated

AFP, Beijing

The death toll from the heaviest rain to hit Beijing in over 60 years has risen to 37, Chinese state media reported yesterday.

Xinhua news agency said more victims of the downpours which battered much of the capital throughout Saturday had been discovered, revising up considerably the number of dead from ten.

The rainstorms led to the evacuation of more than 50,000 people from their homes in Beijing, mostly from the city's outlying mountainous districts, as up to 46 centimetres of rain lashed some areas, the agency added.

Xinhua quoted the Beijing municipal government as saying 25 of the victims had drowned, six had died when their houses collapsed, one was killed by a lightning strike and five had been electrocuted.

Twenty-two of the bodies have been identified, it added.

The agency had earlier reported the death toll at 10 but said it was expected to rise as numerous people, including rescue workers, were missing.

The government flood control headquarters told AFP damage assessments were ongoing.

Up to 46 centimetres of rain fell in Fangshan district, the most rain to hit the city in a 14-hour period since records began in 1951, Xinhua said.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Rescuers and residents stand next to a stranded car which is being pulled up from a flooded street under the Guangqumen overpass amid heavy rainfall in Beijing on Friday.

NEWS IN brief

Myanmar president visits Thailand

AFP, Bangkok

Myanmar's president yesterday made his first official trip to Thailand since taking power in a visit likely to focus on economic ties between his reforming nation and its more affluent neighbour.

Thein Sein arrived in Bangkok for a three-day trip that includes talks with Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra today which is expected to cover development and infrastructure investment for impover-

3 Nato troops killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Three Nato soldiers were killed yesterday in separate attacks in eastern Afghanistan at the weekend, the International Security Assistance Force said.

Two died in a roadside bomb explosion yesterday and another was killed in an insurgent attack Saturday, ISAF said, without giving further details or naming the nationalities of the dead.

The latest deaths take the total toll among the US-led coalition so far this year to 250, according to an AFP count based on the website icasualties.org.

S Arabia calls for Muslim summit

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia has called for an extraordinary summit of Muslim leaders to be held next month to address risks of "sedition" threatening Muslim countries, state news agency SPA reported yesterday.

Saudi King Abdullah has called for "an extraordinary Islamic solidarity meeting to ensure... unity during this delicate time as the Muslim world faces dangers of fragmentation and sedition," SPA quoted Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal as saying.

King Abdullah wishes to convene the summit in mid-August in a bid at "unifying the ranks" of Muslims, the report said. There were no further details concerning the agenda of the meeting.

Blast hits gas pipeline in Egypt

AFP, Cairo

Attackers yesterday blew up a gas pipeline in Egypt's Sinai used to export fuel to Israel and Jordan, the 15th such attack since 2011, the official MENA news agency reported.

Witnesses told AFP they heard a loud explosion and saw flames from the site of the explosion near the northern Sinai town of El-Arish.

Bedouin militants are believed to be behind the spate of pipeline attacks which have occurred since a popular uprising overthrew veteran president Hosni

AIDS conference opens in US

AFP, Washington

The world's largest meeting on HIV/AIDS opens in the US capital yesterday with calls to speed up the global response to the three-decade-long epidemic that killed 1.5 million people last year.

The 19th International AIDS Conference is expected to draw 25,000 people, including politicians, scientists and activists, as well as some of the estimated 34 million people living with HIV who will tell their stories.

Among them is the only man who has achieved a functional cure of HIV through a bone marrow transplant, American Timothy Brown, who is scheduled to appeal for a fresh push toward a cure during the six-day conference that runs through July 27.

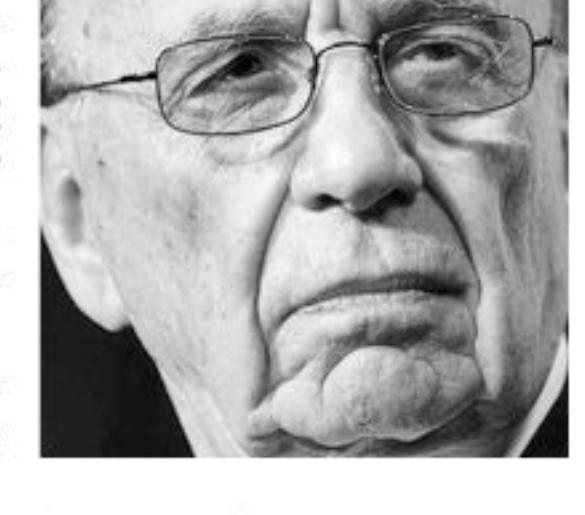
Other high-profile appearances include Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, former president Bill Clinton, former first lady Laura Bush, singer Elton John, philanthropist Bill Gates and actress Whoopi Goldberg.

President Barack Obama has faced some criticism for his decision not to attend in person. He is sending a video message and will invite some attendees to the White House for talks on Thursday, a top health official said.

Held every two years, the conference -- whose theme this year is "Turning the Tide" -- is returning to the United States for the first time since 1990, after being kept away by laws that barred people with HIV from traveling to the country.

Rupert Murdoch quits boards of UK papers

Reuters, London



News Corp's Rupert Murdoch has stepped down from a string of boards overseeing the Sun, Times and Sunday Times newspapers in Britain, the company said in an internal memo on Saturday.

The company described the news as a "corporate housecleaning exercise"

linked to the announcement in June that News Corp would split into two separate companies: A smaller publishing division and a much larger entertainment and TV group.

But the news is also likely to reignite speculation that News Corp could be preparing to sell the titles, following a phone hacking scandal at the now defunct mass-circulation News of the World that has damaged Murdoch's reputation in Britain.

The revelations of sustained criminality prompted an influential parliamentary committee in May to describe Murdoch as unfit to run a major company.

James Murdoch, who was chairman of the

TAX HAVENS

Super-rich 'hiding' at least \$21 trillion: Study

BBC Online

A global super-rich elite had at least \$21 trillion (£13tn) hidden in secret tax havens by the end of 2010, according to a major study.

The figure is equivalent to the size of the US and Japanese economies combined.

The Price of Offshore Revisited was written by James Henry, a former chief economist at the consultancy McKinsey, and commissioned by the Tax Justice Network.

He said \$21tn is a conservative figure and the true scale could be \$32tn. A trillion is 1,000 billion.

Henry used data from the Bank of International Settlements, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and national governments.

His study deals only with financial wealth deposited in bank and investment accounts, and not other assets such as property and yachts.

The report comes amid growing public and political concern about tax avoidance and evasion. Some authorities, including in Germany, have even paid for information on alleged tax evaders stolen from banks.

The group that commissioned the report, Tax Justice Network, campaigns against tax havens.

The report highlights the impact on the balance sheets of 139 developing countries of money held in tax havens that is put beyond the reach of local tax authorities.

Henry estimates that since the 1970s, the richest citizens of these 139 countries had amassed \$7.3tn to \$9.3tn of "unrecorded offshore wealth" by 2010.

Private wealth held offshore represents "a huge black hole in the world economy," Henry said.

Less than 100,000 people worldwide own about \$9.8tn of the wealth held offshore, the study added.

Pranab: The troubleshooter

The story of the 'little' veteran Bengali politician's rise to the Indian presidency

AFP, New Delhi

Pranab Mukherjee, the new president of India, is a 76-year-old veteran who has exerted huge influence as finance, foreign and defence minister over two decades of national transformation.

Famously only five-foot (152 centimetres) tall, Mukherjee entered parliament in 1969 and will cap his long career in the turbulent world of Indian politics with a stint in the largely ceremonial role of president.

Known as a workaholic, a trouble-shooter and a shrewd tactician, he has been a leading figure within the ruling Congress party since the early 1980s when the country was governed according to socialist ideals.

He stood down as finance minister last month to run for president after serving in the post for three years during which India's increasingly market-driven economy has faltered, with growth falling sharply.

With the rupee also at record lows against the dollar, Mukherjee takes up the presidency with his reputation in poor shape compared to when he steered India through the 2009 global financial downturn.

Nevertheless he has retained the respect of a wide spectrum of Indian politicians and is seen as an ardent proponent of "inclusive growth" that would ensure that India's poor share in the country's development.

Born on December 11, 1935 in the small village of Mirati in West Bengal, his father was a "freedom fighter" for India's independence movement who spent more than 10 years in British jails.

Mukherjee, who speaks with a heavy Bengali accent that his colleagues call "Pranabese", began as a college teacher and later worked for the Bengali publication Desher Dak ("Call of the Motherland")

Norway defies Breivik one year on

REUTERS, Oslo

Thousands of Norwegians gathered in silence outside the government's still-damaged headquarters in Oslo and on Utoeya island yesterday to remember the 77 people killed by Anders Behring Breivik in a bomb and gun massacre a year ago.

"The bomb and the shots were intended to change Norway. People responded by embracing our values. He failed, the people won," Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg told the crowds, carrying red and white roses at the memorial in central Oslo.

Breivik, who said his mostly teenage victims were traitors because they supported multiculturalism and Muslim immigration, detonated a bomb outside parliament that killed eight, then shot dead 69 at the ruling Labour Party's youth camp on Utoeya.

"Very few people can go through a day without thinking of the events of July 22," said Vegard Groeslie Wennesland, a Utoeya survivor. "You know, a person you miss, someone you were supposed to hang out with or seek advice from or anything like this. Or something that just reminds you of what happened."

On the island yesterday, about a thousand survivors - secluded from the media - met for a commemoration that included releasing a large, heart shaped helium balloon to which they had attached personal messages.

"It has changed me. I now appreciate the moment, enjoy life here and now," said Wennesland, who escaped Breivik by barricading himself in a cabin with about 50 others.

Closure has been difficult to achieve as Breivik's ten-week trial this year forced Norwegians to relive chilling horrors in detail day after day. A verdict is due on August 24 and a commission report on the events, is expected in coming weeks.

SYRIA CRISIS

Diplomatic funeral of peace plan

AFP, United Nations

Three vetoes of a UN Security Council resolution have left the major powers ready to bury Kofi Annan's peace plan and let President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian opposition fight it out to the death, experts say.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stoutly insisted Saturday that he and special envoy Annan were still looking for ways to end a conflict that Syrian activists say has left more than 17,000 dead.

"We continue to push for a peaceful solution," Ban declared.

But the strife worsens.

Thousands are pouring across Syria's borders, Damascus is a city at war and the United States, European countries and the Syrian opposition now say they will look outside the Security Council for pressure Assad.

However, Russia and China's third veto of a Security Council resolution

on Syria on Thursday was the death knell for joint UN-Arab League envoy Annan's six-point peace plan, according to many diplomats and experts.

The resolution, drawn up by Britain, sought to threaten sanctions unless Assad carried out just one provision -- to

end the use of heavy weapons.

While everyone still blames loyalty to the Annan plan, the blame game over its demise started during the debate.

China's ambassador Li Baodong said unnamed countries had been "negative" about Annan's efforts since he started in February. And Russia accused the western countries of seeking a "military intervention" in Syria even though the United States, Britain and France insist they see no way for a new

Libya-style operation.

"The Russians and the Chinese feel that sanctions was a code for regime change and to some extent they were right," said Mats Berdal, professor of security and development at Kings College's War Studies department in London.

The failure "is no great loss" as it never had a chance of being accepted, said Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, a Washington-based think tank.

"It would be far better to terminate this effort and establish a new one with the mission of bringing about the exit of the current Syrian regime," he said.

"The developments in Damascus and New York now make it clear that the outcome of the Syrian civil war will be decided on the battlefield rather than at the Security Council," said Richard Gowan, associate director at New York University's Center on International Cooperation.

Madagascar faces mutiny

REUTERS, Antananarivo

Mutinous soldiers stormed a military camp near Madagascar's main airport yesterday and the army said it had surrounded the barracks and was holding negotiations with the rebels.

The island nation has been rocked by political turmoil and violence in the three years since then-opposition leader Andry Rajoelina ousted president Marc Ravalomanana, who has been in self-imposed exile in South Africa since his overthrow.

Soldiers and gendarmes were positioned around the camp and an army official said officers had been sent in to negotiate the mutineers' surrender.



Pranab Mukherjee

age compromise among warring parties that have reduced parliament to near-paralysis in recent sessions.

He could also play a role in the formation of the next government if elections in 2014 deliver inconclusive results and numerous parties try to build a stable enough coalition to take power.

Mukherjee, who sometimes stands on a box when giving speeches so he can see over the podium, lists his hobbies as gardening, reading and listening to music, and now he may also find more time for his wife, two sons and daughter.

His son Abhijit has followed in his father's footsteps, last year winning a seat in the West Bengal assembly as a Congress party candidate.